

THE NEWS LETTER

OF THE COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

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UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND—COLLEGE PARK, MD.

DECEMBER, 1945

As Others See Us

Is college English composition training a failure? In contrast to common opinion, I feel that high school English training has a better record of success.

Over a period of many years I have computed and analyzed innumerable correlation coefficients associating students' college achievement scores with quantitative data of various types. Let us consider some correlations computed with English grades and test scores. Each year it is found that (1) Freshman English Placement Test scores and high school English grades show a moderately high positive correlation; (2) College English course grades and Achievement in college show a high positive correlation; (3) College English course grades and Scholastic Aptitude Test scores show a low positive correlation; and (4) College English composition course grades and grades on a two-hour Essay Examination given at the end of the sophomore year show a low positive correlation and occasionally a negative or inverse correlation. What do these correlations mean? Briefly, they indicate that in general, college English composition training is a failure.

The moderately high correlation between the English Placement Test scores and high school English grades indicates that in general the students who make high grades in high school English also make high scores on the Freshman English Placement Test. Regarding the high positive correlation between college English course grades and achievement in college, it bears out the generally accepted belief that English is closely related to achievement and to all of one's experience. The low correlation between college English composition grades and the Essay Examination grade, and the low correlation between college English course grades and Scholastic Aptitude Test scores lead us professors in other departments to ask, "What's wrong with the English department?"

The students I advise sing the English blues continually. They complain that (1) they obtained good grades in high school English composition and poor grades in college English composition; (2) college English themes and essays are graded, frequently, without comment or advice and the stu-

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C. E. A. APPOINTMENT BUREAU

To meet a long-felt want and to increase the benefits of membership, the College English Association will sponsor for English teachers an Appointment Bureau similar to those of other professional groups. It will begin frankly as an experiment, and its machinery will be simple. Its whole purpose will be to help members who are seeking appointment and to assist administrative officers in search of teachers. To prevent the Bureau from becoming an expense to the Association, a small fee will be charged members who register. The Bureau will assist only members in securing appointment, but will not insist that administrative officers become members. Any chairman or dean who wishes to use the Bureau, however, will be urged to support the Association by joining and paying dues.

The Bureau will begin operation at the Chicago meeting for those present at the meeting, and will emphasize the qualities of registrants as teachers. CEA will maintain a headquarters where members may register and where teachers may become members. There will be comfortable and dignified facilities for interviews. After the Chicago meetings have closed, the Executive Secretary will take charge of the Bureau's files

and will consider himself open for further business by mail. Members may register with the Appointment Bureau at any time by filling out the form and paying the registration fee. (The fee will be announced when expenses have been determined. In conformity with CEA's well-established policies, it will be modest.) Administrative officers may at any time either file a notice of a vacancy or request names of members available.

The Appointment Bureau is an extension of the offer made in the November NEWS LETTER to print notices of availability or of vacancies. That offer is not withdrawn. It is contemplated that publication in the NEWS LETTER will either supplement registration with the Bureau or be independent of it. A small space rate for notices may easily become necessary.

The Bureau is the direct result of a suggestion made by Professor Joyce L. Kellogg, who has generously offered to assume much of the burden of its operation at Chicago. Needless to say, the operations of the Bureau will be confidential. Will members please see to it that their colleagues are informed of the Bureau's existence and purpose.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING COMMITTEE

Since during the past war-year the Association's activities have been somewhat curtailed, the Nominating Committee proposes that the present officers and directors be asked to extend their term for another year, in order

that the Association's period of increased activity may begin under their experienced direction. The Committee therefore suggests that the members be requested to ballot upon the slate of officers as it now stands, with the terms of service of each director extended for one year.

C. T. Logan, Madison College,
Harrisonburg, Virginia
T. M. Pearce, Univ. of N. Mex.,
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Alexander Cowle, Chairman,
Wesleyan Univ., Middletown, Conn.

A post card ballot is enclosed with this issue of the NEWS LETTER. Members present at the Chicago meeting may vote there. The results of the election will be announced in the January issue.

Freedom Speaks

I have only just now read Professor Emory's article in the October News Letter. Perhaps it is too

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Technique Of Accomplishment

The title of this article is one that I have used many times, and I expect to use it many more. Each time it takes on more definite meaning until I begin to think of it as something which can be definitely taught; and while it is of value in any field, I think of it as having especial importance to the writer and in the writing classroom.

I stole the phrase from a Syracuse colleague, Dr. Floyd Allport, a psychologist, and I am glad to find this chance to give him proper credit. He asked me years ago whether I was doing anything in a writing classroom to train my students in a technique of accomplishment, which he felt was quite distinct from any other techniques necessary in various types of writing.

He cited his own experience: that he had once been asked to write an article for a popular magazine on a subject in his own field. He struggled with that task, destroying one false start after another, and rewriting the whole thing two or three times. Finally he got it done and saw it in print.

The magazine wanted another article, and the next time he found it easier to get started, and easier to adapt himself to this popular audience he was addressing. He had to rewrite it once or twice, but not so completely. Finally after several such articles had been written, he found that he could approach the task without anxiety and get through with it at a sitting. He had acquired a technique of accomplishment.

I am sure that this is quite distinct from any other technique. A man may know the quickest and best way to repair an automobile, but somehow he never can get it done. A landscape painter may have mastered all the necessary techniques of his art and have invented some of his own; he may be in very truth an artist; and yet his studio may be full of unfinished canvases. He is master of all the necessary techniques except that of accomplishment.

I have never felt that the final test of the work in an advanced class in Composition is premature publication in some popular magazine. This may be partly because I have too much respect for my

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THE NEWS LETTER

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Editorial . . .

"I know you're an English prof and I never was so good in English, but I've done pretty well since I got out of college, and I guess I'm not altogether numb. I want my kids to get an education, not just learn how to do something; but if they get the same routine I got, they'll probably do like I did. Take my English, for example. I wanted to learn English; a fellow's sort of behind the eight ball unless he can talk. And I used to like to read. You know, my girl brought *The Grapes of Wrath* home the other day, and I felt kind of sore that a youngster'd be given a book like that, but that Steinback could write, even if the war did put an end to all that Okie stuff.

"But to get back to my English. First year I was in high school, all I remember is we did an operetta. We used to rehearse every afternoon, and all most of us did was horse around in the auditorium, or skip out. It was a good show. Bill Brogan was in that; he had a swell voice, he's in some radio show now. Maybe we wrote a little, but nothing much. The way I remember, we used to get stuff from the encyclopedia. And we had a literature book, poems and stuff. There was one I remember yet, about some fellow shut up in a castle—Chillon, *The Prisoner of Chillon*. The teacher used to read to us and say it was good stuff, but none of us got it. A coupla girls, maybe.

"We used to have books to read in the library; there were some on science, and a lot of biographies. We could read them and tell the teacher about them. The more we read the better mark we got. That's how I used to get A, you know the way it is. You sort of turn it on.

Teachers are so damned happy to have anybody polite to them. But I never learned grammar. Oh, I know I shouldn't make a double negative, or end a sentence with a preposition, but that's about all. One thing I forgot. We used to read Shakespeare, too. I remember how we figured out where the high point of the action was and drew a chart; and a lot of phonograph records we had to listen to. I just wish you'd take a half hour and tell me what English is all about.

"Then when I got to college, I registered late and got put in a late afternoon section. The fellow we had was a good egg. I remember one night we had a big poker game up in his room. But he was writing a book or getting a degree or something; he'd come in and talk, and we used to write a theme once a week. I learned something that way. He'd say some of the damndest things on our papers. I remember one comment yet, 'You've no idea of logic, style, or grammar.' But he gave me a C. What I mean is I never really got any of those books we read. He'd tell us about the authors—he sure knew a lot of dirty stories—but I never got what *Vanity Fair* was about until I saw it in the movies. You know, there's a lot of women like Becky Sharp. I'll never forget one thing he told us, though. One day he was going on about something, and he said, 'I always put my left shoe on first.' Now, why should I remember that?"

Change The Title?

By securing the privilege of second class mail, the NEWS LETTER could reach members at an annual saving of approximately \$100. But in the past fifteen years under the terms of the basic law granting the second class privilege, the office of the Third Assistant Postmaster General has admitted no publication with "Letter" in its title to that privilege, although certain "Letter" publications previously admitted continue to enjoy it. When discussing this problem with the editor, the assistant in charge of News and Periodical Mail raised the question whether the NEWS LETTER was a distinctive title, and whether we might not find a more individual one. Do the members feel it is desirable to issue their publication as economically as possible? Have they suggestions for another title? Do they feel the NEWS LETTER is a title they wish to keep?

TEACHER AVAILABLE

Man, 44, married, Ph.D., American literature specialist. Nineteen years experience, including executive position, thesis direction. Editor and author, texts, creative writing. Wants new location, 1946--A2

Personals . . .

In June, George F. Reynolds retired as Chairman of the Department of English and Speech, University of Colorado. The University has issued a volume in his honor, *Elizabethan Studies and Other Essays*.

Henry S. Canby writes, "I flew out to Australia last March to deliver a series of twelve lectures on American History . . . under the auspices of the University of Melbourne. The Office of War Information sent me out, and after spending two months in Melbourne, I visited other cities and university centers in mainland Australia and Tasmania, and spoke in all the four leading cities of New Zealand . . . I came back impressed with the movements towards new literature, especially in Australia."

In June, Robert M. Gay retired as Director of the School of English and Chairman of the Division of Language, Literature, and the Arts, Simmons College. He was succeeded as Chairman by Wylie Sypher and by Raymond F. Bosworth as Director.

Thomas O. Mabbott has been appointed Professor of English at Hunter College as of January 1, 1946.

Secretary Emeritus Burges Johnson will lecture his way through the South, beginning at the College of William and Mary. After the holidays he will visit the University of New Mexico, and spend February and March at the College of Mines in El Paso, setting up a composition classroom.

Homer Heath Nugent, Head of the English Department, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, died in late May, 1945.

Richard W. Schmelzer, Associate Professor at R. P. I., became assistant to the President, September 1.

Certainly one of the reasons for the failure of the humanities to accomplish what they should have accomplished educationally before the war has been a lack of vitality and personality in teaching, and a failure to relate our subject matter to life as it is being lived and felt. It seems to me that the CEA exists primarily to encourage a new vitality parallel with advances in scholarship. That is why I think that the CEA has just begun to do its work. Henry S. Canby.

VACANCY REPORTED

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C. E. A. Committee On Curriculum In English

What is college English, in terms of the curriculum? Is there a group of essential undergraduate courses which it may seem proper for every English department to offer?

What should the first-year course be, if only one year can be required of all students? If two years are required, what is the best type of course (or courses)? What courses, if any, should be required of all English majors? Should there be a reading list instead of prescribed courses? Should there be a comprehensive departmental examination in the Senior year?

These are questions to be faced by a CEA committee on curriculum appointed by President Van Doren. It is composed of E. K. Brown, University of Chicago; Odell Shepard, Trinity College; Norman Foerster, Chapel Hill, N. C., Chairman. Departments of English and individual members are urged to render assistance by suggesting answers to some of the questions above. They should address the chairman of the committee.

FREEDOM SPEAKS

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late to comment on it, but I am disturbed that a member of the C.E.A. who "responded with enthusiasm" to the idea of *Freedom Speaks* should have been disappointed by the book.

Apparently Professor Emory has forgotten the condition specifically laid down for it—that it should be short, not more than 50000 or 75000 words in all. Within such

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TECHNIQUE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

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own critical judgment as a teacher to be willing to substitute for it the judgment of any half-baked magazine editor. For he may be accepting fiction according to some prescribed pattern, which he himself did not invent and is not able to defend, except by repeating patter which he has learned from his magazine owner or from the glib talk of a few shallow contemporaries. There are always several

editors dictating the contents of successful magazines; successful because the advertising manager is a more intelligent and better trained man than the editor.

But another reason why time should not be diverted to efforts at publication is that time in those final years of college is so precious, and there are so many better ways to use those classroom hours. One of them certainly is the acquiring of this technique of accomplishment. It is a peculiarly important technique to the writer, because there is always a certain resistance to creativity which must be overcome.

Every student in that classroom has dreamed dreams of what he would like to write. In his imagination he has almost shaped a poem or a story or an essay, but not quite! And then the dream fades and all that he can remember is that he had a wonderful idea, and he had even thought of how it would end or how it would begin, or some high paragraph at the center; and now it is all gone.

The classroom must help the young potential writer to acquire habits of mind which will enable him to seize and hold these dreams.

The chief business of the writing classroom is "form"; and if a young writer masters many techniques of form,—verse, prose, fiction, essay, editorial, news report,—then he will find it easier to remember his dreams, because even as he dreams them he will shape them into some form. I think the best training in form comes from a great many different assignments of widely different sorts; because I am sure that any kind of writing trains for any other kind. I do not believe that those Composition classrooms accomplish much which confine themselves to the writing of fiction alone, or verse, or essays, or news. The best training for an advertising copy writer is practice in verse writing; and a wonderful training for the writer of imaginative fiction is the drill in objective factual writing which a newspaper reporter should receive.

The dream, the form, and the accomplishment; and without that final technique, the first two will end up in futility. —Burgess Johnson

FREEDOM SPEAKS

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limits it could not include the whole of such pieces as the *Arcopagitica* or Burke's *Speech on Conciliation*, yet to omit entirely either one in such a book would have been indefensible.

I do not like summaries or condensations of important artistic wholes any better than Professor Emory does. Admittedly, too, quotations cannot give any adequate idea of such works. The aim in

Atomic Punctuation

The scroll presented by the earth's surface has been altered in a way that changes the significance of everything written there before the first atomic bombs fell upon it. Those bombs may be interpreted as a gargantuan form of punctuation, since, like our everyday commas and periods, they indicate how we are to read the record. The series of subtle variations set up in our minds by the small black signals which help us to interpret the words on a page may thus claim a sort of kinship with the earth-shaking note of the split atom, which reverberates with its own commanding tone, determining the accent of a mighty text in which we have never yet been able to read very far.

The mind of an English teacher, even one who no longer occupies a classroom, is tempted to play with these analogies. College students seldom feel secure in their command of punctuation, and since the help they receive is too often viewed as correction, with no debate about alternate possibilities, they are likely to miss innumerable opportunities for testing the mettle of their sentences by readjusting their "points."

Must we say that the period is the point implied by the bomb? And if so, what degree of finality does this point suggest? Certainly it goes as far as punctuation can go in marking an end. But we cannot yet believe that even for our grandchildren the final end of the sentence will come.

A mark or interrogation is even more pertinent, though in its call for an answer it evades any of the responsibility for finding one.

Still evading, but at least indicating some of the subtler overtones of destiny, are the semicolon and the colon. The semicolon now indicates balance, and the colon implies expectation. The semicolon would therefore serve as a kind of bunker, with at least a pattern surviving for a newly developed world. The colon might introduce any question whatever in the history suggested in our sentence, or any ultimate oracle.

There remains the comma, always likely to seem a safe compromise to the perplexed student facing unknown issues in the mak-

ing of literature. Most of us are only too likely to hesitate in a comma state of mind as we think of the atom. But there are other attitudes which our marks of punctuation may help us to define. In the interest of effective writing we may as well sharpen these tools, so that our students may be able to express any turn that human experience may take in the coming years—any turn short of the conclusive explosion that threatens to sweep away all our words and thought. —Margaret Ball (Mount Holyoke College), Lakeville, Conn.

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AS OTHERS SEE US

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dents want to know how to improve their writing; and (3) when a comment is given, often it is meaningless, such as "writing immature."

The freshman training is not sufficient to teach students the meaning of clarity and organization, or even to remove grammatical blunders from their writing. Or if it does produce good themes in English, there is little carry-over in other courses. Should there not be in every college a cooperative supervision of all written work and oral recitation? The English department should lay down the principles and supervise the basic discipline; written work in all or in many other departments might be planned and graded in conjunction with the English department. If this means more teachers of English, the end certainly justifies the means. It is well enough to say that all teachers should supervise the English in their classes, but except within narrow limits, there simply is not time. However, if students knew that every piece of written work were to be read as an English theme, or even might be, with its grade in part dependent on its structure and clarity and style, much of the present complaint of semi-literate graduates would evaporate. The necessary time in semester hours, and the necessary staff cannot be denied if the importance of the end is granted. At present, certainly in my experience, there is no quarrel with the end and little feeling either among faculty or students that it is being attained.

A primary obstacle is the objection of English teachers to teaching composition. Who, in the department, teaches Composition? Who wants to teach Composition? Who is capable of teaching Composition? Who is rewarded by administration or colleagues for being a good Composition teacher? Where are the specialists in English Composition?

To improve the basic instruction in English Composition, must there not be more instructional hours? Must there not be fewer students per class? Must there not be continual practice in writing and in speaking, with drill, individual conferences, correcting of papers?

Certainly the basis of general training in expression should include the development of vocabulary, the encouragement of wide and wise reading, the stimulation of students to alertness and observation, the increase of their information. Should not these be the responsibility of all teachers, conscious and planned? The special responsibility of the English department is drill in usage, drill in sentences, drill in punctuation, drill in bibliography and outlining, expert guidance in developing clear and graceful style. The problem of composition is a college problem, and it should be recognized as a college problem. But the English department has special responsibilities. And it should recognize them.

F. E. B.

F. E. B. is full professor in one of the country's well known colleges. Personal reasons prompt the wish for partial anonymity.

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